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Warriors and Scribes: Essays on the History and Politics of Latin America

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This volume is a collection of seven essays on Latin America by James Dunkerley, all written and published separately between 1992 and 1999. The most immediate question posed, given the wide and varied range in topic covered and in approach (no two essays being alike), is both how the essays work individually and, more pertinently, how coherently they hang together. Collected essays can pose special difficulties: if the author is already an established literary celebrity, collected works constitute an already accepted subject for study, regardless of topic, but, for others, one perhaps expects such a collection to show some sort of coherent unifying theme to justify publication. Thankfully, one does emerge, although that ought not to surprise anyone familiar with Dunkerley's voluminous work, where consistent themes and patterns can be distinguished, and it is clear that all seven essays display already familiar qualities: an impressive erudition, an ironic eye, a literary elegance and eloquence, a genuinely original way of thinking, and a clear affection for, and vast knowledge of, Latin America. Simply, the reader of this collection will not be disappointed.

The opening essay, 'Barrientos and Debray: all gone or more to come?' (1992), is a fascinating study which sets the theme and the tone (of challenging analysis, astute observation, broad-brush painting, and erudition)

and gives us Dunkerley as would-be biographer. Originally an inaugural lecture, it partly responds to Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, taking up the question of whether his two subjects Rene Barrientos (ex-revolutionary and Bolivian president) and Régis Debray (ex-revolutionary, philosopher and later Mitterand advisor), who coincided on different sides of Che Guevara's final battle in Bolivia in 1967 are, in Fukuyama's terms, 'yesterday's men'. Here, Dunkerley's colours seem nailed to the mast with his admonition against 'unilinear perspectives that confuse the 'development' of political economy with the 'nature' of a society in its entirety (p.18). However, his purpose is wider as his critical reviews often are -, and he clearly looks for a moral within the forgotten Plutarchian traditions of 'parallel lives'.

Of the two, Dunkerley reserves his most scathing commentary for Debray, a person for whom he seems to have little sympathy, emerging as confused, egoistic, unreliable and even, perhaps, shallow intellectually. Dunkerley's deconstruction of Debray's Althusserian positions is perceptive and sharp (in every sense), and if there is a villain of the piece it seems to be the slightly dilettante French philosopher who strayed irrelevantly into the Bolivian drama. Barrientos, however, survives largely unscathed from Dunkerley's pen a generally more attractive person, whose foibles and rightward political shift are ultimately less criticised, more logical and even less self-centred. If Debray is 'villain', then Barrientos is inherently more 'heroic', and certainly more rounded and appealing. Seemingly, in the theme of 'warriors and scribes', Dunkerley has preferred the former.

Yet that is ultimately misleading, since the codicil to the essay a two-paragraph paean to the Bolivian revolutionary, Chichi Ríos Dalenz, killed in Pinochet's Chile is more significant than it seems. For it introduces what may be at least one of the collection's intentional unifying themes the homage to the 'third man', to those who die in defeat rather than die in victory (Barrientos) or, like Debray, survive defeat to 'ruminate' (p.18). In fact, of course, the essay is about a good deal more than the two principal characters and Dunkerley is here only a 'would-be biographer', since it is really a thoughtful discussion of Bolivia, Latin America, intellectuals, Guevara and political commitment, and does, indeed, really set the tone for the collection in several ways.

The second essay 'Beyond Utopia: the State of the Left in Latin America' (published in *New Left Review* in 1994) is effectively a critical review to a leftist audience of Jorge Castañeda's disenchanted view of the Latin American Left in *Utopia Unarmed.* Indeed, the essay is more a critique than an exposition of Dunkerley's own views, which are often not easy to discern. Here, Castañeda is treated sympathetically, seen as honest, broad in vision and largely accurate in his judgements, and even as still possessing an underlying utopian vision in his suggested alternative to the Left's impasse. Dunkerley also praises the limpidity which makes Castañeda's prose readable although one suspects that this in fact damns with faint praise, as 'limpidity' can easily be taken as an over-simplification which misses complexities. Certainly Dunkerley's own prose is occasionally far from 'limpid', although that is because of the depth of the argument and the awareness of complexity.

Dunkerley evidently feels that Castañeda has missed much, being weak on the 'new social movements', and also somewhat narrow in his definitions, presenting a fragmented and selective critique of the traditional Left based on personal experience and preferences. Moreover, he does not accept Castañeda's uniform rejection of the need for revolutionary violence and clandestinity, citing the Zapatistas and pre-1959 Latin America as respective proofs of their necessity.

This essay therefore gives us several facets of Dunkerley: as literary critic, with a capacity for subtle and nuanced views, with hints of a political perspective and commitment. It also gives us the author as political analyst, with a prescience on later Mexican politics although also a time-trapped underlying confidence about US intentions in the region that owes much to Clinton's benign neglect.

Dunkerley's capacity for political analysis, however, comes out convincingly in the next essay 'The 1997 Bolivian Election in Historical Perspective' (1998). With an eye for often exhausting fine detail, he dissects the remarkable electoral return of a politician - Hugo Banzer - to the Bolivian presidency, three decades after he began his brutal rule as a hated military dictator. The irony is compounded by Banzer's tactical alliance

with the now centrist MIR, founded in 1989 to overthrow him, and by the coincidence with the return to Cuba of Che Guevara's bones. The message at first seems clear: criticism ought perhaps to be levelled either at opportunism, or at Guevara's failed radicalism.

However, there is more to the message, since the picture which Dunkerley paints of recent Bolivian history is one of a vibrant, sophisticated and subtle polity. With a fine analytical mind, he deconstructs the complexities of voting behaviour through, and beyond, statistics, demonstrating the strength of tactical voting and of alliances, and revealing the emergence of a *continuismo* surprising given Bolivia's past notoriety for political volatility. Here, the many tables provided are invaluable, especially in measuring the scale of the shift since 1952; the details are, moreover, interspersed with a wealth of astute observation, in which the only real criticism is that one easily gets lost in the to-ing and fro-ing of groupings, alliances and shifts and might have benefited from a chart.

Indeed, Bolivia's political development is really the 'hero' of the essay, as Dunkerley presents a convincing picture of the maturation of the political system into a 'polyarchy' with an astonishing degree of real 'indigenisation' (of culture, attitudes and politics), and with an MNR which skilfully managed to use its traditional loyal base to change political direction, the key to the growing consensus. Dunkerley sees the roots of this transition in Banzer's 1978 removal by his fellow military, becoming more profound after 1985. Once again, though, the coda is revealing the brief peroration on Guevara's bones introduces reflections on the Bolivian Left's reaction and on the wider Left's relevance to Bolivia. Here, equating Guevara with other 'extra-Bolivians', such as Bolívar, who have crossed the Bolivian stage, Dunkerley seems to see the real 'hero' of the piece in the Bolivian people.

Perhaps the least satisfying essay, because, being the shortest (only 8 pages), it frustrates, is the next one, '"All that trouble down there": Hollywood and Central America' (1993). However, though short, it is exhilarating and polemical, and brings out yet another Dunkerley persona: as astute film critic. Indeed, what we get is an often scathing but always subtle and perceptive critique of Hollywood's treatment of Central America, in particular of the American film industry's shift to the region of the locus of 'conflict' and 'the enemy' from an East-West spectrum, but without any awareness of the historical context, allowing it to indulge in less subtle and more explicitly tasteless stereotypes - usually of sex, power and treachery.

Within this picture, Dunkerley gives us sharp comment on a number of exemplary films, including Gregorio Nava's 1983 'El Norte' (wooden in characterisation but none the less accurate in its depiction of the Latino dilemma), John Milius's 1984 'Red Dawn' (a right-wing paranoid fantasy), Haskell Wexler's 1985 'Latino' (sermonising from the Left), and, finally, comparing Roger Spottiswoode's 1983 'Under Fire' and Oliver Stone's 1986 'Salvador', leading to a perhaps surprising but convincing preference for the honesty of the latter. Once again, what comes through in this excursion into yet another genre is not only Dunkerley's almost *renacentista* breadth, but also his evident affection for the supposed cinematic subjects, the 'forgotten' of Latin America. Indeed, by now, an unspoken unifying theme is becoming clear.

Perhaps the most puzzling essay, however, is the next 'The Study of Latin American History and Politics in the United Kingdom: an Interpretative Sketch' (1996). It puzzles since it is not clear where it fits into the 'whole', although it again gives full rein to Dunkerley's characteristic talents the often astonishing breadth of his reading and knowledge (you believe that he has actually read and digested all the works cited), his desire to be fair, and his attention to detail.

The essay opens well, with a sweeping panorama of Latin America when British 'Latin Americanism' began, and then catalogues the key people, publications, centres and academic events of the last three decades. History rightly receives the lion's share of his attention, given its pioneering and continuing 'core' role. Here his observations are astute: on the remarkable continuity over the period, not least in the penchant for narrative and empirical pragmatism; on the causes of the 'explosion' (university expansion, increased travel opportunities and the development of historiography in Latin America); on the lasting (and largely beneficial) impact of 'dependency theories', albeit often indirectly, through other influenced disciplines; on the weak treatment of gender and of Brazil; on the mixed blessings of the evolving relationship between

'cultural studies' and history (occasionally creative but also risking a neglect of a research base); on the seminal impact of economic history. Politics gets a narrower treatment, but the same qualities are evident, and one particularly welcomes the observation that the British study of Latin American politics (always reflecting the shifts in British political life) has benefited from a rich exchange with, and openness to, journalistic and NGO-based work on the region.

One underlying theme, here, of course is predictably the comparison with the United States. Dunkerley's judgements are occasionally dangerous in their sweep but never without foundation, especially on British historians' lesser concern with Latin America's 'otherness' and greater interest in traditions, and, in politics, on the British tendency to eschew the American preference for paradigms and theoretical debates and to gravitate towards empiricism. There is also the underlying theme: the tendency for British Latin Americanism to be 'committed' in several senses, a conclusion that, indeed, seems to return to the opening discussion, to the changing continent itself.

'Panorama' is very much and deliberately also the approach of the next essay the 1999 'The United States and Latin America in the Long Run (1800-1945)'. A bold and ambitious essay, it nonetheless succeeds in presenting a convincing set of arguments, although, again, the result is less a clear statement of the author's position than a set of astute critiques of others' positions. It is Dunkerley as interpretative historian, whose broad vision nonetheless allows him to engage with a range of revealing source texts.

He begins by taking issue with Peter Smith's then recently re-stated 'imperialist thesis', suggesting that the 'newness' of the 1990s situation should not blind us to the continuities with, and the context created by, the pre-Cold War days a 'long run' indeed. The essay works through a series of sub-sections, of which the first is Cuba, normally seen as 'exceptional'; Dunkerley, however, gives us an eloquent 'mini-essay' on the inconsistencies of such 'exceptionalism' and persuades us that Monroe's principle of non-transferability continued in Cuba until 1960, and then, following a three-decade interlude where policy was determined ideologically, returned (as in the Helms-Burton Act). The section on the Monroe Doctrine is also astute, identifying the declaration not as a charter for expansionism (as often assumed), but, rather, a declaration of containment, reflecting a deep-seated and persistent isolationism, which made the leap from the Doctrine to Roosevelt's later Corollary one from an avowal of principle to an assertion of conditionality.

Dunkerley then traces the evolution of American confidence, questioning the La Feber thesis that 1860-98 saw the emergence of a new imperialism; instead, he still prefers to see containment as the driving force, reminding us that American fears of Europe, and especially Britain, were not unjustified, and demonstrating that only between 1900 and 1914 did American economic power overtake Europe and justify an outward-looking policy. Even then, isolationism continued, evolving naturally into the 1933 Good Neighbor policy. Indeed, he asserts, it was 1941 which provided the real American turning-point, not solely because of involvement but also because it was driven ideologically.

The final essay is one of the best 'The Third Man: Francisco Burdett O'Connor and the Emancipation of the Americas' (1999). It fully brings out Dunkerley's biographical skills; the attention to detail, penchant for anecdote and tendency to engage in tangential observation which all characterise much of his writing (and can occasionally either distract or confuse) are, in biography, enriching additions to the subject and yet more proof of the subject's fascinating humanity. Moreover, his sympathy for the subject is clear, much more so than was the case in the opening essay. Brother of the more famous Irish Chartist, Feargus, and godson of the parliamentarian, Sir Francis Burdett, whose surname he adopted, O'Connor ended up fighting for liberation in Bolivia, 'going native' to the extent of Hispanising his first name. His biography before leaving Britain and after reaching Bolivia is rich in incident and challenge, Dunkerley seeing his motives as primarily political, as much as anything seeking freedom from the oppressive British political climate.

Dunkerley is fascinated by O'Connor not only because of his Irish and Bolivian connections but also because he is an archetypal 'third man', less famous than the other two whose names he bore, but whose history is well worth recounting. He is also, evidently, somewhere between the 'warriors' and the 'scribes', but, unlike the 'third man' who silently opened the collection Ríos Dalenz -, emerged victorious and is rightly

remembered in his adopted country.

This, then, returns us to the collection as a whole, and its supposed coherence. Here, one imagines that the order of the essays (which is not chronological) has been deliberately chosen; certainly the opening and closing essays give it a unity and circularity of theme: the forgotten subjects of history with whom Dunkerley has a palpable sympathy. Some of the other essays are, however, less clearly contained within this theme, the essay on the United States, for example.

These are, however, minor quibbles, and, while one can question the order, the fact is that it is not obtrusive or ever distracting. We have the order which we are given, for good or bad, and must take the essays separately at face value. Nonetheless, not least because several of the essays included do not really touch more than marginally on the supposed theme of 'warriors and scribes', there remains a feeling that the collection might have benefited from the inclusion of either an introduction (or short preface) or a conclusion. In fact, of course, as a collection, cohesion is not in itself essential, since it is largely also something of a personal journey through themes, subjects and countries (although Bolivia figures large), illustrated with detail, comment and passing analysis.

In fact, analysis is one clear *forte*. As observed earlier, Dunkerley comes over throughout as much more of a critic - an excellent, sharp and balanced critic than a theorist, as a reviewer whose quill is sharp, whose irony is enjoyable, and whose ability to see beyond the obvious is always welcome. He writes intelligently, not only with erudition, but with an ability to develop and hold an argument that never gets lost, in spite of diversions although at times one suspects that the casual reader may be challenged by the pace, the detail and the occasional density of style that arises from the pertinent meaning that needs to be mined from the apparently passing comment.

Indeed, the essays are all in their own way, and in the best of senses, challenging, for one of Dunkerley's characteristics is his consistent search for the unusual, the exception, the flaws in the conventional argument and the necessary doubt. He gives us real scholarship questioning, critical and based on thorough knowledge and wide reading.

Overall, however, what we perhaps most value in the collection is the always evident sense of his commitment to the discipline, the subjects, Latin America and, of course, the 'forgotten' heroes. He is a historian who actually cares, but this informs his work and sharpens, rather than dulls, his judgement, and this quality above all makes the collection both welcome and valid in itself. Ultimately, the question of coherence becomes less relevant, as it is 'commitment' and the sympathy for the 'forgotten' (person, question, angle, detail) which unifies them all.

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[2]

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